

DEVOTING OURSELVES TO THE MANIFESTLY UNATTAINABLE¹

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“One man scorned and covered with scars still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable stars; and the world will be better for this.” – Cervantes, *The Impossible Dream*

“Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible.” [“Be realistic, demand the impossible.”] – Graffiti Slogan, Paris 1968

1. The problem of hopelessly utopian duties

Sometimes justice is at least potentially achievable. But at other times it is plainly a hopeless prospect: the impediments to achieving justice are transparently insurmountable; potent agents or social structures block the way forward; injustice is too deeply entrenched. What, if anything, might morality require of us in situations of this kind? What duties, if any, might we have with regard to achieving the *manifestly unattainable*?

On the one hand, it is tempting to think that we may sometimes have duties not to give up on achieving the manifestly unattainable, and that insisting otherwise would allow us to settle for less than we ought (see Tessman 2015; Stocker 1990). Some injustices are simply intolerable; they call for uncompromising resistance and repudiation, whether or not we have any chance

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of successfully overcoming them (Boxhill 1976; Delmas 2018, ch. 6). Suppose that a woman living in a powerful and highly repressive patriarchal regime has been sentenced to be stoned to death for the crime of adultery; her execution will take place 12 hours from now. We are under no illusions about the fact that there is absolutely no chance of saving her. The governing authority is resolved to carry out the stoning as a means of asserting the state's political and cultural independence on the world stage, and any action to help the woman escape from her holding cell will trigger her immediate execution. Her fate is sealed. Yet we might feel that we are duty-bound not to give up on saving her – to do things for the sake of preventing the stoning from taking place (e.g., lobby our governments, organise political protests, engage in direct communication with the political elite in the patriarchal regime, and so on) despite the fact that we know all too well that this is a hopeless prospect. To do anything else would be to acquiesce to injustice. Let us call duties of this kind *hopelessly utopian duties*.²

On the other hand, it is also tempting to think that “ought” implies “can” in at least the weak sense³ that we can only have duties to achieve outcomes that are *not manifestly unattainable*, and that insisting otherwise would allow

² We will focus on cases of hopelessly utopian duties involving acts of political resistance. Other potential candidates include duties involving acts that manifest our existential freedom (e.g. Albert Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus) and duties involving certain religious acts (e.g. achieving Nirvana or purging ourselves of sin).

³ Many philosophers are tempted to go further and embrace some stronger interpretation of “ought” implies “can:” say, one where the “can” in question is the “can” of ability or the “can” of feasibility (see e.g. Southwood 2016). However, there are also important objections to these stronger interpretations of “ought” implies “can” (see e.g. Stocker 1971; Sinnott-Armstrong 1984; Tessman 2015; Estlund 2011). We do not take a stand here on the issue of whether any such strong interpretation can be maintained. It is enough for our purposes that the idea that “ought” implies “not manifestly unattainable” is at least sufficiently plausible to be worth assuming for the sake of seeing where this gets us. Of course, this is perfectly compatible with denying that “ought” implies “able” and/or “ought” implies “feasible.” We are grateful to a referee for helping us to clarify this point.

morality to impose illegitimately severe demands on us.⁴ By hypothesis, preventing the woman from being stoned to death *is* manifestly unattainable. Thus, we cannot have a duty to prevent her from being stoned to death. Perhaps we have a duty to do something *else* for her: say, to publicise her situation and hold the authorities to account; or to ensure that her story is not simply forgotten. And, of course, it would be *marvellous* if we were (somehow, miraculously) to find a way to save her. (“Marvellous” does not imply “can.”) But we cannot have a *duty* to do so. Duties cannot demand the manifestly unattainable (Raïkka 1998; Brennan and Pettit 2005; Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012; Lawford-Smith 2013; Miller 2013; Southwood 2016; Wiens 2015; Gilibert 2017).

So we have a puzzle. There seem to be cases in which we have hopelessly utopian duties, yet such duties seem to fly in the face of a very weak version of the “ought” implies “can” principle.⁵ Giving up on hopelessly utopian duties would seem to allow us to settle for less than we ought and, hence, for morality to be objectionably permissive. Giving up on “ought” implies “can” would seem to allow for morality to demand more of us than can reasonably be expected and, hence, to be objectionably severe. What is to be done?

Here is a simple thought: perhaps we can solve the puzzle simply by interpreting hopelessly utopian duties as duties to *pursue* the achievement of

⁴ It would also appear to require giving up on certain important roles that our moral talk and thought are supposed to be capable of playing (such as the role of settling the question of what to do (Schroeder 2011; Southwood 2016)). If it is possible to have duties to achieve manifestly unattainable outcomes, then it seems clear that we could correctly settle the question of whether we have a duty to do something and yet the question of whether to do it might remain open.

⁵ For ease of exposition, we shall omit this qualification in what follows and speak simply of the principle that “ought” implies “can.” It should be borne in mind, however, that it is the weak interpretation that will be at issue.

manifestly unattainable outcomes (as opposed to duties to *achieve* such outcomes). Duties to pursue the achievement of an outcome can be discharged without achieving the outcome in question; they require only that we engage in activity that is appropriately “oriented” toward the achievement of the outcome; that we act “in the service of” or “for the sake of” achieving the outcome.

Whereas duties to *achieve* manifestly unattainable outcomes would indeed violate “ought” implies “can,” duties to pursue the achievement of such outcomes are perfectly compatible with “ought” implies “can” because they do not require us to achieve manifestly unattainable outcomes.

Our purpose in this paper is to examine, evaluate, and ultimately defend a particular version of this solution. The main challenge is to say exactly what the relevant “duties to pursue” are supposed to involve. Some philosophers have vaguely gestured towards the related idea of a duty to pursue the “infeasible” (see Southwood and Wiens 2016, pp. 3057-8; Gilabert 2017). Yet it remains unclear how these duties to pursue are to be understood, the conditions under which we might have them and, hence, whether they provide a plausible model for interpreting hopelessly utopian duties in particular. We shall begin by considering several familiar candidates: *duties to try*; *duties to approximate*; *duties to do one’s part*; and *dynamic duties*. We shall argue that, while it is plausible to think that we have such duties and that they may be important, none of them provides an adequate account of hopelessly utopian duties. Given the inadequacy of these accounts, we then propose a previously untheorized class of duties, which we call *duties to devote ourselves* to achieving an outcome. We suggest that such duties provide a more plausible vindicating interpretation of

hopelessly utopian duties that is consistent with the principle that “ought” implies “can” and, hence, a more compelling resolution of our motivating puzzle.

A couple of quick remarks about terminology before we begin. First, we have said that hopelessly utopian duties are duties not to give up on achieving *manifestly unattainable* outcomes. To say that an outcome is “manifestly unattainable” in the sense we have in mind is to say that we are fully cognisant of the fact that we are robustly disposed to be certain to fail to achieve the outcome even insofar as we try and don’t give up trying to achieve it. Manifest unattainability is therefore a special – and especially extreme – form of infeasibility.⁶ Second, we shall say that we have a “duty” to X (where Xing may involve either doing or pursuing) just in case (a) we have sufficiently weighty normative reasons to X and (b) Xing is a fitting response to the reasons R such that we are in a position to rationally X because of, or on the basis of, R (see Kieseewetter 2018). So, for example, we have a duty to keep a promise insofar as keeping a promise is a fitting response to the normative reasons we have to keep the promise; we can rationally keep a promise *because* we have provided the promisee with assurance that we will do as we have promised (Scanlon 1998, ch. 7), or because we have invited the promisee to trust us (Shiffrin 2008; Friedrich and Southwood 2011), or whatever. By contrast, if an evil demon is going to kill

⁶ At least, this is true given (most of) the existing accounts of feasibility, for two reasons. First, most existing (cost-based, possibility-based, probability-based, and disposition-based) accounts of feasibility imply that achieving an outcome is feasible only if it is *not counterfactually fluky* – i.e., only if it is not the case that achieving it would be a fluke if it were achieved (see Southwood and Wiens 2016); yet achieving an outcome might be counterfactually fluky (and, hence, infeasible) without being manifestly unattainable (since we may have some low but non-zero chance of success conditional on trying and not giving up). Second, most existing accounts (including Gilabert and Lawford-Smith’s (2012) account, which does not accept the non-flukiness condition above; see also Lawford-Smith 2013) concede that achieving an outcome O might be infeasible without us being fully cognisant of the fact that it is infeasible. If this is right, then it follows that, on most existing accounts of feasibility, achieving an outcome may be infeasible without being manifestly unattainable.

some innocent folk unless we form the intention now to drink some poison tomorrow (cf. Kavka 1983), then, as we will use the term “duty”, we do *not* have a duty to intend now to drink the poison tomorrow. That’s because we cannot rationally intend now to drink the poison tomorrow on the grounds that (as we correctly apprehend) the evil demon will kill the innocent folk. This is the wrong kind of reason to form an intention to drink the poison.

2. Duties to pursue: existing candidates

We are looking for a way to reconcile hopelessly utopian duties with the idea that “ought” implies “can” by interpreting them as duties to pursue (as opposed to duties to achieve) the manifestly unattainable. There are various different ways in which we may pursue the achievement of an outcome and, hence, various different kinds of duties that we might have in mind. We shall begin by considering what we take to be the four main existing candidates. We will conclude that, while all four are potentially important, none is adequate to vindicate hopelessly utopian duties in particular.

A. Duties to try

One way of pursuing the achievement of an outcome is by *trying* to achieve it. So we might be tempted to think that hopelessly utopian duties are *duties to try* to achieve the manifestly unattainable. Many cases in which we have duties to pursue the infeasible seem to be well explained by appealing to duties to try. For example, it seems plausible to suppose that one can have a duty to try to persuade one’s government to change its draconian refugee policy, or a duty to try to prevent a recalcitrant friend from marrying a mentally unstable and

dangerous partner. Further, it seems plausible that these duties persist even if it is infeasible for us to achieve these things and, hence, it is not the case that we have a duty to succeed (see Southwood and Wiens 2016, pp. 3057-8).

How should we conceptualise duties to try? We shall assume that an agent A counts as trying to achieve an outcome O only if she intends to give herself at least some chance of achieving O (perhaps even to achieve O) and does things so as to give herself some chance of achieving O (or perhaps so as to achieve O).⁷ If we understand trying in this way, however, we cannot have duties to try to achieve the manifestly unattainable; thus, duties to try cannot provide a vindicating interpretation of hopelessly utopian duties. Why not?

First, as we have seen, duties to try to achieve the manifestly unattainable, if they exist, are duties to try to achieve what we *know* we have no chance of achieving (conditional on trying and not giving up). There is something very odd about the idea of such duties if trying to achieve an outcome involves intending to give ourselves some chance of achieving it. That is because it is surely *irrational* to intend to give ourselves some chance of achieving something that we know we have no chance of achieving. For example, assuming that saving the woman from being stoned to death is manifestly unattainable, it seems irrational to intend to give ourselves some chance of saving her. Perhaps it can be rational for us to *desire* or *hope* or *wish* to save (or give ourselves some chance of saving)

⁷ We shall focus on the weaker version of this account on the grounds that it appears to be better placed to vindicate the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties. Notice, however, that our objections apply, *a fortiori*, to the stronger version (in parentheses). One challenge for the weaker version is to explain why acting from such an intention counts as trying to *achieve* the outcome in question as opposed to trying to *give ourselves some chance of achieving* the outcome. However, we will not press this objection here. Even if the weaker account is mistaken as an account of trying, it might still provide us with the basis for a good account of hopelessly utopian duties according to which such duties are to be understood as duties to try to give ourselves some chance of achieving the manifestly unattainable.

her (cf. Velleman 1992). But *intending* to give ourselves some chance of saving her is irrational. Intentions have a distinctive functional profile in virtue of which they are subject to special rational requirements including a requirement not to intend to do what we know (or perhaps believe) we have no chance of doing (Bratman 1987). So, if we understand trying as involving intending to give ourselves some chance of achieving, then duties to try to achieve the manifestly unattainable would be such that discharging them would require us to be irrational. There is a strong presumption that legitimate duties cannot require us to behave irrationally.

Second, even if we don't *know* that we have no chance of achieving an outcome, it seems highly doubtful that we can have duties to try to achieve an outcome that we *in fact* have no chance of achieving. That is because an intention to give ourselves some chance of achieving an outcome that we have no chance of achieving cannot be a *fitting response* to the reasons we have for forming such an intention. Why not?⁸ First, notice that the only kinds of reasons to which intending to give ourselves some chance of achieving an outcome could be a fitting response are so-called *object-given* reasons to intend, i.e., reasons to intend that are also reasons to realise the object of the intention. Intending to give ourselves a chance of, say, meeting a deadline is only a fitting response to reasons that are also reasons to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline. These include reasons such as the fact that not meeting the deadline will result in significant costs to others, or that we have made a promise to meet the deadline. Now compare them to so-called *state-given* reasons to intend

⁸ We are very grateful to a referee for helping us to clarify and strengthen the argument below.

to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline. These are reasons to intend to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline that are *not* also reasons to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline, such as the fact that, given our psychology, having or forming such an intention will be *motivating* and help to make it the case that we won't be *quite so late* in missing the deadline. We do not mean to deny the existence or importance of such state-given reasons to intend. Nonetheless, it does not seem that intending to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline can be a *fitting* response to them (see Parfit 2001; Hieronymi 2005). Perhaps it would be fitting to respond to them by forming a different intention: say, an intention to bring it about that we have an intention to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline. But we cannot rationally intend to give ourselves some chance of meeting the deadline *because* or on the *basis* that having the intention would produce good consequences. Or so we shall assume. Second, we cannot have object-given reasons to give ourselves some chance of achieving an outcome that is manifestly unattainable – i.e. an outcome we have no chance of achieving (even insofar as we try and don't give up trying). To insist otherwise would be to hold that we can have reasons to X even if we have no chance of Xing conditional on trying to X and not giving up trying. Thus, it follows that an intention to give ourselves some chance of achieving an outcome that is manifestly unattainable cannot be a fitting response to the reasons we have to do so; and, hence, it cannot be the case that we have a duty to try to achieve what we in fact have no chance of achieving if trying involves intending to give ourselves some chance of achieving whatever it is that we are trying to achieve. Duties to try are simply the wrong kinds of duties to vindicate hopelessly utopian duties.

B. Duties to approximate

A second possibility is that hopelessly utopian duties are *duties to approximate* the manifestly unattainable. For our purposes, an agent A counts as *approximating* the achievement of an outcome O when A successfully achieves some *other* outcome O* that is sufficiently similar in relevant respects to O. For example, we approximate driving within a 60 kilometres per hour speed limit when we drive, say, no more than 65 kilometres per hour, whereas we fail to approximate driving within the speed limit when we drive too fast (say, at 150 kilometres per hour). We have a *duty* to approximate the achievement of O just in case we have a duty to achieve some O*, which is a *feasible approximation* of O. For example, we have a duty to approximate a workplace free of gender-based or race-based discrimination just in case we have a duty to achieve some outcome that would constitute a feasible approximation of a non-discriminatory workplace: say, the outcome in which workplace discrimination is significantly reduced.

In many important cases where we appear to have duties to pursue the infeasible (without corresponding duties to achieve it), it seems that these can be readily explained in terms of duties to approximate.⁹ For example, some philosophers believe that we have a duty to pursue the achievement of a perfectly just society despite the fact that it is presumably infeasible for us to

⁹ Those familiar with the “general theory of second best” (Lipsey and Lancaster 1956) might be inclined to reject outright duties to approximate on account of the fact that this theorem is thought to support a “fallacy of approximation” (Estlund 2020, chap. 14). But this misunderstands the implications of the theorem, which only says that, under conditions that frequently obtain, we are unlikely to achieve certain fundamental normative goals by approximating the normative ideal (see Wiens 2020 for details). This conclusion is compatible with having duties to approximate on some occasions.

achieve it. It is natural to understand this thought as asserting a duty to achieve a feasible approximation of a perfectly just society: say, the outcome in which the most egregious injustices are eliminated and the remaining injustices are significantly reduced (e.g., Christiano and Braynen 2008; Gilibert 2012, p. 243; Valentini 2012, p. 42).

Even so, duties to approximate are not the right duties for our purposes. To begin with, there are some important cases of hopelessly utopian duties in which there is simply *no feasible outcome* that could be reasonably said to approximate the manifestly unattainable outcome we are thought to have a duty to pursue. A duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death is a case in point. There may be other valuable outcomes that are feasible to achieve, say, to encourage other governments to condemn the behaviour of the authoritarian state. And perhaps we can imagine modifications of the case in which there *is* some feasible approximation: say, where it is feasible (perhaps by lobbying foreign governments) to persuade the state to punish her in some other (less cruel and unusual) way. But in the case as described none of the outcomes that are feasible for us to achieve are sufficiently similar to the outcome in which she is saved to count as a feasible approximation.

Second, even if we adopt a *different* account of approximation to allow for duties to approximate to encompass such cases,¹⁰ duties to approximate are still

¹⁰ We have in mind, for example, an account according to which an agent A approximates an outcome O if A achieves an outcome O* that, among the set of feasible outcomes, is most similar in relevant respects to O. The main difference with our account in the text is that this alternative allows an approximation of O (O*) to be extremely distant from O. For example, if one arrives at a dinner party six hours late and this is the best one can do within given constraints, then, on the alternative account, one approximates arriving on time. More generally, the alternate account implies that it is always possible to approximate achieving O insofar as there is always some feasible outcome O* that most closely resembles O.

of the *wrong kind* to vindicate the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties. Hopelessly utopian duties are *uncompromising* in the sense that they demand that we *not give up on* achieving the manifestly unattainable outcomes in question; giving up on achieving the outcomes is incompatible with discharging the duties. But acting to approximate an outcome O (by achieving O*) is obviously compatible with giving up on achieving O. For example, in acting to reduce domestic violence, we may have completely given up on eliminating domestic violence. In acting to reduce injustice, we may have completely given up on achieving perfect justice. And so on.¹¹ Since hopelessly utopian duties are not compatible with giving up on achieving the manifestly unattainable, it is not plausible to interpret them as duties to approximate.

C. Duties to do our part

A third possibility is to interpret hopelessly utopian duties as *duties to do our part* (see Collins 2019). We shall say that an agent A *does her part* to achieve an outcome O if A does something that would contribute to the achievement of O were it conjoined with complementary actions performed by others. For example, a violinist does her part to achieve the outcome in which Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is performed if she plays the symphony's first violin part and a performance of Beethoven's Ninth would be achieved were her actions conjoined

¹¹ Notice that, while approximating achieving an outcome O (by achieving O*) is *compatible* with giving up on achieving O, it does not *entail* giving up on achieving O. That is because one way of achieving O* might be precisely not to give up on achieving O: say, trying to achieve O.

with the actions taken by other musicians to perform (in conjunction) the parts written for the other instruments.¹²

Duties to do our part appear to provide a compelling explanation of many of the important utopian-sounding duties we have to pursue normatively significant outcomes in social and political life. For example, each of us plausibly has a duty to pursue the eradication of sexism and racism. But this does not mean that any of us has a duty to eradicate sexism and racism *on our own*. The eradication of sexism and racism, like most valuable social and political objectives, cannot be achieved by the actions of any individual, but only by groups of individuals acting together. Our duty to pursue the eradication of sexism and racism, then, seems well-interpreted as a duty to do our part to achieve the eradication of sexism and racism: say, to avoid being sexist and racist ourselves; to call out instances of sexism and racism in others; to support others who fight against sexism and racism; and so on.

Similarly, it might seem that duties to do our part are exactly the duties we need to make sense of hopelessly utopian duties such as the duty not to give up on saving the woman from execution. The idea would be that there is some possible (doubtless extremely complex) collective action such that if everyone were to do their part, this would suffice to prevent the woman from being executed. While no individual has a duty to prevent her from being executed, each of us has a duty to do our part in preventing the execution from taking

¹² We set aside tricky questions about the mental states (e.g., attitudes and expectations) that must obtain for an agent to be interpreted as doing his or her part in a larger collective action. Something as simple as (A performs X & B performs Y & C performs Z) counts as a collective action for our purposes, and A does her part if she performs X.

place. The hopelessly utopian duty we have vis-à-vis the woman should be understood in just these terms.

Unfortunately, such an interpretation faces a serious problem, which arises because whether one has a duty to do one's part to achieve an outcome will often depend on whether *others* will do their part. Moreover, as numerous scholars have noted, doing our part to achieve an outcome without others doing their part can often fail to do anything whatsoever to help advance the achievement of the outcome, and may even make things worse (see e.g. Gibbard 1965; Regan 1980; Dietz 2016).¹³ Under these circumstances, it is implausible to suppose that we have a duty to do our part to achieve the outcome. We may have a *conditional* duty to do our part to achieve the outcome – that is, a duty that is conditional on enough others also doing their part. Perhaps we may even have a *collective* duty that has as its content that each of us does our part (Estlund 2020, ch. 11). But we cannot have an unconditional individual duty to do our part. By contrast, hopelessly utopian duties, such as the duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death, would seem to be (or at least include) precisely individual duties that make demands that are not conditional on the behaviour of others in this way. Even if virtually no one else shows any inclination to do their part in saving her, we might still have a duty as individuals not to give up on

¹³ For an example where doing one's part to achieve an outcome would do nothing to help advance the achievement of the outcome, imagine persisting in doing one's part to paint a house when one's job is to mix the paints in spite of the fact that one knows that one's lazy, good-for-nothing co-worker has abandoned the job without so much as picking up a brush (Dietz 2016, p. 969). For an example where doing one's part would make things worse, imagine persisting in doing one's job to save the life of a patient (suppose that one's job is to excise part of one of the patient's vital organs) when one knows that one's lazy, good-for-nothing co-surgeon has gone golfing and, hence, will not do her part (i.e. apply stitches to the excision); and that, whereas refraining from performing the excision will result in the patient's dying relatively painlessly, performing the excision without the application of stitches will result in the patient's dying in agonising fashion (Estlund 2020, ch. 11).

saving her. Thus, it would seem that interpreting hopelessly utopian duties as duties to do our part is inadequate.¹⁴

D. Dynamic duties

A fourth possibility is that hopelessly utopian duties are what Pablo Gilabert has called “dynamic duties” (Gilabert 2011; 2017). A dynamic duty to achieve an outcome *O* is a duty (a) to transform our current circumstances *C* into relevantly different circumstances *C** such that, in *C**, we have a duty to achieve *O* that we lack in *C*; and (b) to achieve *O* in *C**. For example, suppose that our salary is so meagre that it would be too demanding for us to give \$1000 each month to Oxfam and, thus, we do not have a duty to do so. Nonetheless, we could still have a *dynamic* duty to give \$1000 each month to Oxfam if we have a duty to change our circumstances in a way that would trigger a duty to give \$1000 each month to Oxfam – for example, by getting a new, more lucrative job – and then to ensure that we in fact give \$1000 each month to Oxfam.¹⁵

Dynamic duties might have an especially important role to play in situations where it is currently infeasible for us to achieve certain desirable outcomes. That is because it is at least arguably sometimes feasible for us to *change* what is feasible: to transform our current circumstances so that

¹⁴ A referee made the interesting suggestion that, even if we are wrong and there can be duties to do our part in such cases, interpreting hopelessly utopian duties in these terms remains questionable on the grounds that duties to do our part appear to lack the requisite stringency. In some cases, if others are not doing their part, it would seem that we have a duty to do *more* than merely our part.

¹⁵ Notice that a dynamic duty involves a conjunction in its content. If the first conjunct fails to obtain – i.e. we fail to get the new, more lucrative job – then, while we have violated a dynamic duty, it is not true that we will have violated a duty to give \$1000 each month to Oxfam; we do not have such a (non-conjunctive) duty.

outcomes that are currently infeasible for us to achieve *become* feasible.¹⁶ Suppose that it is infeasible, given our current circumstances, to achieve the elimination of sex- and race-based social hierarchies. Still, there might be things that it is feasible for us to do to transform the background social conditions (e.g., people's beliefs and motivations, the structure of political decision-making institutions, and so on) such that, at some point in the future, eliminating such social hierarchies would come to be something that it is feasible for us to achieve (Gilabert 2011, 2017; cf. Jensen 2009 and Ypi 2012). If this is indeed the case, then, given the moral importance of eliminating sex- and race-based social hierarchies, it is at least plausible that we have a duty to pursue the elimination of these hierarchies in the sense that we have a dynamic duty to eliminate them.

Dynamic duties also appear to be well placed to explain the features of hopelessly utopian duties that made problems for the previous candidates. Unlike duties to try, the kind of intention that would be required to discharge a dynamic duty involving an outcome that we know we have no chance of achieving (presumably an intention to make it feasible for us to achieve the outcome) appears to be perfectly rational and fitting. Unlike duties to approximate, dynamic duties are perfectly compatible with our being in situations where there is no feasible approximation of the outcome in question given our current circumstances, and they may be completely uncompromising in that they enjoin us not to give up on achieving the outcomes in question (as

¹⁶ While we shall grant this claim for the sake of argument, it is worth noting that it is not uncontroversial. In particular, it is inconsistent with the following principle: if it is feasible at time t_1 for A to make it feasible for A to achieve O at t_2 , then it is feasible at t_1 to achieve O at t_2 . (Of course, it does not follow that it is feasible at t_1 for A to achieve O at t_1 .) A principle of this sort has considerable *prima facie* appeal and is implicit in some existing accounts of feasibility (see e.g. Wiens 2015).

opposed to permitting us to settle for some other outcome that is sufficiently like it). Unlike duties to do our part, we may have dynamic duties to foster the kind of collective action that could achieve outcomes that are individually unattainable.

What is not possible, of course, is to have dynamic duties involving the achievement of outcomes that are *diachronically* as well as merely synchronically unattainable – outcomes that are not merely unattainable now, but where changing our circumstances so that they become attainable in the future is also itself unattainable. The problem is that this is an important element of genuinely manifestly unattainable outcomes such as saving the woman from being stoned to death. Saving her is not only unattainable under our current circumstances but also unattainable under any alternative circumstances it is feasible for us to bring about. Therein lies its hopelessness. Given this feature of hopelessly utopian duties, we simply cannot vindicate them by looking to dynamic duties.

In sum, none of the existing kinds of duties to pursue can provide a plausible vindicating explanation of the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties. Some might take this as evidence that we cannot have such duties. But assuming that we can – and that we want to reconcile them with “ought” implies “can” – we need to look beyond the existing candidates.

3. Duties to devote ourselves

We propose that the duties we need are what we shall call *duties to devote ourselves* to achieving an outcome. We count as *devoting ourselves* to achieving an outcome O in the relevant sense just in case we value achieving O and do things because of the (ostensible) value or importance of achieving O – things

that we take it are or would be effective ways of helping to achieve O in favourable conditions.

Devoting ourselves to achieving O involves three key elements. First, it involves *valuing* the achievement of O in some respect. To value the achievement of an outcome is a matter of seeing it as somehow valuable or important, as something that we have significant reason to care about and to respond to in various ways. Suppose that we are devoting ourselves to repairing a romantic relationship that has suffered badly from neglect. Part of what this means is that the outcome in which the relationship is successfully repaired must have some value for us. Perhaps this is because we take the relationship to be of intrinsic value: to be valuable in and of itself. Or perhaps it is because we take successfully repairing the relationship to be of instrumental value: to be valuable inasmuch as it will help to realise something else that we take to be valuable (such as our own or our partner's happiness or well-being).

To say that devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome involves valuing its achievement in some respect does not mean that it is *in fact valuable* in that respect. It may be that achieving an outcome to which we are devoting ourselves – and, hence, that we take to be valuable – is not, in fact, valuable at all. (Think of devoting ourselves to carrying out a terrorist plot.) Even if achieving an outcome to which we are devoting ourselves is valuable, it may be that the value that we take its achievement to involve is not, in fact, a genuine value (think of devoting ourselves to repairing a romantic relationship for the sake of annoying one's parents-in-law); or that its achievement does not, in fact, involve that value (think of devoting ourselves to repairing a romantic relationship for the sake of

ensuring the happiness of one's partner, when he or she would, in fact, be much happier if the relationship were to end).

The fact that devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome involves valuing its achievement means that it is quite different from trying. As we saw, trying to achieve an outcome involves *intending*: intending to at least give ourselves some chance of achieving the outcome. Intending to X involves having a disposition to do things so as to X. Clearly, however, we may value achieving an outcome without having any disposition to do anything so as to give ourselves some chance of achieving the outcome. For example, we might value returning a friend's prized first edition of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* – i.e. we consider doing so to be of very great significance – without having any disposition to do things so as to give ourselves some chance of returning the book since, as we know all too well, we dropped it overboard by mistake while sailing in the Whitsundays.¹⁷

The second element involved in devoting ourselves to achieving O is that it involves *doing things because of the ostensible value of achieving O*. There are many things that have ostensible value for us without us being responsive to their ostensible value in the slightest. For example, it might be extremely important to us to lose 10 kilograms and yet we are utterly unresponsive to its ostensible value – the fact that we take it to be important never manifests itself in our conduct. In contrast, devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome requires, not merely taking its achievement to be valuable or important, but also *acting on*

¹⁷ Some philosophers (e.g. Schroeder 2007) hold that intending to X involves a special kind of valuing: namely, taking ourselves to have reason to X. However, even if this is right, it does not suffice to establish that valuing the achievement of O entails intending to achieve O. For one, taking ourselves to have reason to X is, at most, a necessary condition for intending to X. For another, even if it sufficient as well as necessary, valuing the achievement of O does not entail taking ourselves to have reason to achieve O. For example, while we value returning the friend's first edition of *Middlemarch*, we do not take ourselves to have reason to do so.

that basis. For example, devoting ourselves to repairing a romantic relationship involves not merely valuing the outcome in which the relationship is repaired, but also doing things that manifest the value we place upon it, such as organising a romantic dinner, or cancelling a work trip, or arranging relationship counselling. If asked, “Why have you organised a dinner at such a fancy restaurant?” we might truly respond, “Because of the importance of repairing our relationship.”

Notice that we may act upon the value of achieving O – and, hence, devote ourselves to achieving O – in two quite different ways (see Pettit 1997; Scanlon 1998). One way of acting upon the value of achieving O is to do things that we take to be ways of *promoting* the value of achieving O. Suppose that we are devoting ourselves to making others happy. Presumably, valuing making others happy primarily involves taking ourselves to have reasons to promote – to bring about, or make it more likely that we bring about – states of affairs in which others are happy. Moreover, if this is right, then devoting ourselves to making others happy presumably involves doing things because we take these things to be ways of promoting the value of making them happy – i.e. ways of bringing about (or making it more likely that we bring about) states of affairs in which they are happy.

The other way of acting upon the value of achieving O is to do things because we take them to be ways of *honouring* the value of achieving O. Honouring the value of achieving O is a matter of manifesting a kind of *recognition* or *respect* for the value of achieving O that acknowledges it for the kind of value it is. Take devoting ourselves to repairing the romantic relationship. While we may clearly do things that would constitute promoting

the value of repairing the relationship – doing things to bring about states of affairs in which we and others enjoy such relationships and that they continue and blossom – acting on the basis of the ostensible value of repairing the relationship does not seem to be simply (or even primarily) a matter of acting in this way (see Scanlon 1998). It seems, at least in addition (and arguably instead), to be a matter of acting on the basis of reasons that we take ourselves to have to *recognise* and *respect* certain values that are involved in successfully repairing the relationship – say, reasons to exemplify the value of the relationship itself by, in effect, being a good partner.

The third element of devoting ourselves to achieving O is that the things that we are doing (because of the ostensible value of achieving O) are things that we take it are or would be *effective ways of helping to achieve O in favourable conditions*. Conditions count as “favourable” in the relevant sense just in case it is *feasible* for us to achieve O. So devoting ourselves to achieving O means doing things that, we take it, are or would be effective ways of helping to achieve O in conditions where it is feasible for us to achieve the outcome. Notice that this does not mean that the things we are doing are things that are *actually effective* ways of helping to achieve O. To be sure, it does mean this when we know that it is in fact feasible for us to achieve O. But when we know that it is not feasible for us to achieve O, devoting ourselves to achieving O means that the things we are doing are things that we believe *would* be effective in helping to achieve O in certain non-actual conditions but that we recognise will be actually completely ineffective. Thus, devoting ourselves to achieving O means doing things that we take to be effective ways of helping to achieve it on the supposition, as it were,

that it is feasible for us to achieve it (and whether or not it is, in fact, feasible for us to do so).¹⁸

One might wonder why this third element is necessary. Why isn't it enough, to count as devoting ourselves to achieving O, that we do things because of the ostensible value of achieving O? We need the third element because it seems that we may do things because of the ostensible value of achieving O that are not oriented in the right way towards the achievement of O. Suppose that we value repairing a romantic relationship and do things because we take them to be ways of promoting or honouring the value involved in successfully repairing the relationship but in full recognition of the fact that the things we are doing, while effective ways of promoting or honouring the relevant values, would not be effective ways of helping to repair the relationship even in favourable conditions. For example, suppose that we write a poem celebrating the good times we have had together in the full knowledge that, while constituting a fitting and moving testament to the value of the relationship, the poem will make it *less likely* that we will successfully repair the relationship since it will help to make vivid in one's partner's mind the chasm between then and now. In circumstances of this kind, we suggest that it would be a mistake to say that we are devoting ourselves to repairing the relationship. For that to be so, we must be doing things, not merely that we take to be ways of promoting or honouring the ostensible value of the repaired relationship, but that are also oriented towards achieving the repaired relationship in the sense that we take them to be effective ways of helping to repair the relationship in favourable conditions. Devoting ourselves to

¹⁸ We might think of this as involving a version of the Kantian idea of action under the idea of freedom.

achieving an outcome therefore involves a *special way* of promoting or honouring the ostensible value of achieving the outcome.

We are now able to say what it takes for us to have a *duty to devote ourselves* to achieving O, namely that we have sufficiently weighty reasons to do some X because of or as a response to the value of achieving O, X is a fitting response to these reasons, and X in fact is or would be an effective way of helping to achieve O in favourable conditions.

It will be important to our argument in what follows that such duties may be of two quite different kinds depending on whether the reasons in play are reasons to promote or reasons to honour. *Promoting* duties to devote ourselves to achieving an outcome are duties that are grounded in reasons to promote the value of achieving the outcome in question. For example, a department chair may have a promoting duty to devote herself to achieving harmony among her colleagues when and because she has sufficiently weighty reasons to promote the value of departmental harmony (say, to bring about states of affairs in which there is as much harmony as possible); and devoting herself to achieving harmony among her colleagues (say, by organising social events, initiating constructive dialogue among erstwhile bitter foes, and so on) is a fitting response to these promoting reasons. Notice that she may have such a duty even if she does not have a corresponding duty to achieve harmony among her colleagues: say, if the latter, unlike the former, would be unreasonably burdensome. *Honouring* duties to devote ourselves to achieving an outcome are duties that are grounded in reasons to honour the value of achieving the outcome in question. For example, a father may have an honouring duty to devote himself to achieving his daughter's flourishing when and because he has

sufficiently weighty reasons to recognise and respect the value of his daughter's flourishing, and devoting himself to achieving her flourishing (say, by taking steps to ensure that her basic needs are met, showering her with love, and helping her to cultivate her particular talents) constitutes a fitting response to these honouring reasons. Again, he may have such a duty even if it is not true that he has a duty to *achieve* her flourishing: say, if something about him or his daughter or their relationship or their circumstances would make achieving her flourishing intolerably costly.

4. Duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable

Can we have duties to devote ourselves to achieving outcomes that are manifestly unattainable? We shall argue that we can. In particular, we can have *honouring* duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable. The achievement of manifestly unattainable outcomes can have a kind of value that calls for doing things that would help achieve such outcomes in favourable conditions because they amount to ways of honouring the value in question.

To see this, return again to the case of the woman awaiting execution by stoning for the crime of adultery. Saving the woman from such a cruel and disproportionate punishment is a matter of the utmost importance, something that would realise values of the most significant kind. Moreover, it is natural to suppose that some of the values in question call for being honoured. For example, we might think that the importance of saving her derives, at least in part, from a certain kind of valuable *status* that she has as a person. It might also derive, in part, from a certain kind of valuable *relationship* that we have to her. The fate that awaits her fundamentally dishonours or disrespects these values

(i.e., the valuable status she has or the valuable relationship we enjoy with her). So the importance of saving her from her unjust fate is at least partly a matter of the importance of preventing these values from being dishonoured or disrespected. Of course, by hypothesis there is nothing that we can do to save her and, hence, nothing that we can do to prevent her status as a person or the relationship we enjoy with her being so heinously dishonoured by others. So honouring her status as a person or the relationship we enjoy with her cannot require us to successfully save her.

What might it require of us? One thing that it surely requires is to avoid participating in, or supporting, the actions of the state that will dishonour the woman's status as a person or the relationship we enjoy with her, perhaps even actively disavowing and condemning such actions. But this is not all. Plausibly, it also requires exhibiting positive recognition of, and respect for, those values in our conduct: acting in ways that acknowledge and affirm her status as a person or the relationship that we enjoy with her. We suggest that doing things such as protesting, directly communicating with political elites of the state in question, lobbying foreign governments, and so on – things that would plausibly help to save her in more favourable conditions – may sometimes be ways of displaying respect for her valuable status as a person or the valuable relationship that we enjoy with her and, thus, of honouring these values. Indeed, such actions may sometimes be the *only* way of showing full and proper recognition for these values. To refrain from performing any such actions – to allow these values to be heinously dishonoured without offering resistance – would amount to a failure to acknowledge and affirm her status as a person or the relationship that we

enjoy with her and, thus, constitute an additional form of disrespect (see Boxhill 1976; Hill 1973; Delmas 2018, ch. 6; Hay 2011).

If we are right, then it is clear that we can have potentially weighty reasons to do things that are oriented toward the achievement of manifestly unattainable outcomes that amount to honouring crucial values that are at play in such outcomes. Moreover, doing the things in question *because* of these reasons – i.e. because we take them to be ways of honouring the (ostensible) value of achieving the manifestly unattainable outcomes in question – seems to be a wholly fitting response to these reasons. Since devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome is a matter of doing things that would help to achieve the outcome in favourable conditions because we take these things to be ways of promoting or honouring the ostensible value of achieving the outcome, it follows that we may indeed have duties to devote ourselves to achieving manifestly unattainable outcomes, namely honouring duties. The fact that an outcome is manifestly unattainable is perfectly compatible with our having a duty to devote ourselves to achieving it.

We have argued that we may have honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable. Might we also have *promoting* duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable – duties to devote ourselves to achieving manifestly unattainable outcomes that are grounded in reasons to *promote* values that would be realised by achieving the outcomes in question? On the face of it, it might seem straightforward to show that we can indeed have such promoting duties. Consider a duty to devote ourselves to ending factory farming by doing things such as informing consumers about the conditions in such factories, lobbying governments to impose economic sanctions on factory

farming, and so on. This seems like a pretty good candidate. It is hard to deny that ending factory farming is something of genuine importance and that this is due to a value – the value of avoiding animal suffering – that calls for being promoted. We have weighty reasons to bring about states of affairs in which animal suffering is avoided, or at least minimised. Moreover, devoting ourselves to ending factory farming seems to be the uniquely fitting way of responding to the reasons we have to promote the value of avoiding animal suffering.

But this would be too quick. It is not clear why responding to these weighty reasons should require us to *devote ourselves to ending factory farming* in particular. Suppose that we pursue the termination of factory farming in some other way such as by approximating it. For example, perhaps we successfully undertake to reform and regulate factory farming practices in such a way that the very worst forms of animal suffering are eliminated. Or suppose that we devote ourselves to something other than the termination of factory farming: say, to reducing or minimising animal suffering instead. In other words, even if we think that it *is* important to end factory farming, suppose we do things, not *because* of the ostensible value that would be realised by ending factory farming, or because they would help to end factory farming in more favourable conditions, but because we (correctly) surmise that the things we are doing will help to reduce or minimise animal suffering. Both of these – acting to eliminate the worst forms of animal suffering or pursuing the minimisation of animal suffering – seem to be perfectly fitting ways of responding to the reasons we have to promote the value of avoiding animal suffering. But in those cases, it is not true that our reasons to promote the value of avoiding animal suffering generate, in particular, a duty to devote ourselves to achieving the manifestly

unattainable outcome of ending factory farming. Even if the termination of factory farming is manifestly unattainable, reducing or minimising animal suffering clearly isn't.

A potential response is that devoting ourselves to achieving the termination of factory farming is in fact a more effective means to reducing animal suffering, given our own psychology or the psychology of others whom we stand to influence. But this is not the kind of reason to which we can rationally respond by pursuing the termination of factory farming. More generally, from what we can tell, the only kinds of reasons that we might have for promoting the value that would be realised by some manifestly unattainable outcome to which we might rationally respond by pursuing the achievement of that outcome would never call for devoting ourselves to achieving it. They might call for some other mode of pursuing its achievement – approximating, or doing our part, or whatever – but not for devoting ourselves to achieving it. Thus, from what we can tell, there cannot be duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable that are grounded in reasons to promote.¹⁹

One might wonder why honouring duties should be different from promoting duties in this regard. Why is devoting ourselves to achieving the manifestly unattainable sometimes the uniquely fitting response to our reasons to honour the value that would be realised by its achievement but not to our reasons to promote? The answer is simply that there seem to be cases where the only way to fully honour certain values may require precisely that we do things

¹⁹ In denying that there can be promoting duties to devote ourselves to achieving the manifestly unattainable, we are not denying that there can be promoting duties *of other kinds* to pursue the manifestly unattainable. For example, perhaps we have promoting duties to *do our part* to end factory farming. We are grateful to a referee for forcing us to clarify this point.

that are oriented toward achieving a manifestly unattainable outcome – things that would effectively help achieve the outcome were its achievement feasible. Other ways of pursuing the manifestly unattainable and devoting ourselves to achieving other outcomes are not enough to fully honour the values in question. Devoting ourselves to saving the woman from being stoned to death is a case in point. Suppose instead that we devote ourselves to honouring her status as a person in ways that fall short of taking actions that would effectively help to achieve her release in more favourable conditions (e.g., by holding a vigil in her honour, or by posting affirmations of her humanity on social media). This would fall short of honouring her status as a person. The only way to honour her status as a person is to devote ourselves to achieving the manifestly unattainable, namely, to saving her from her cruel fate.

5. Hopelessly utopian duties as honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable

Interpreting hopelessly utopian duties as honouring duties to pursue the manifestly unattainable is appealing because it promises to vindicate the possibility of such duties (and, hence, avoid the spectre of objectionable moral laxity) without forcing us to give up on “ought” implies “can” (and, hence, avoid the spectre of illegitimate moral severity). The challenge is to identify a class of duties to pursue that can deliver on this promise. We saw that extant candidates (duties to try, duties to approximate, duties to do our part, and dynamic duties) are not up to the task. Suppose instead that we interpret hopelessly utopian duties as honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable. Can this *devotion interpretation* do any better?

We believe it can. First, the devotion interpretation provides a straightforward vindicating explanation of the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties. The explanation is just this: It is perfectly possible for us to have hopelessly utopian duties because, as we have seen, it is perfectly possible for us to have honouring duties to devote ourselves to achieving the manifestly unattainable, and hopelessly utopian duties just are (honouring) duties to devote ourselves to achieving the manifestly unattainable. Thus, we have an explanation for why we may coherently think that we have hopelessly utopian duties, such as a duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death, and, hence, avoid the spectre of objectionable moral laxity.

Second, this explanation is perfectly consistent with “ought” implies “can” since duties to devote ourselves to achieving an outcome do not entail corresponding duties to achieve that outcome. Thus, we can think that we have hopelessly utopian duties such as a duty not to give up on saving the woman while also accepting that it is not the case that we have a duty to actually *save* the woman. This means that we can also avoid the spectre of illegitimate moral severity.

So we have a solution to our motivating puzzle. That is good news. Still, our solution remains incomplete, for we have not yet established that we should *accept* the devotion interpretation. We have established that *if* we accept the devotion interpretation, then this provides us with a way of explaining the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties without forcing us to give up on “ought” implies “can.” This is surely some reason to accept it (at least assuming that we are right to accept both the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties and “ought” implies “can”), but it is hardly conclusive. To show that the devotion

interpretation provides a *fully satisfactory* interpretation of hopelessly utopian duties, we would also need to show that honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable are (a) duties of the *right kind* and (b) duties with the *right content* (or extension).²⁰ Let us consider each of these in turn.

A. Duties of the right kind?

The first challenge is to show that duties to devote ourselves are of the right kind, that is, that they share certain core features of hopelessly utopian duties.

Take the *uncompromising* or *unyielding* quality of hopelessly utopian duties: the fact that they require us *not to give up* on achieving some manifestly unattainable outcome. This is a rather puzzling feature of hopelessly utopian duties that some other duties to pursue the infeasible plainly lack. Most obviously, as we saw, duties to approximate are perfectly compatible with giving up on achieving the outcome in favour of some alternative outcome. Similarly, duties to try, while they might appear to do better, involve duties not to give up on achieving an outcome so long as, but only so long as, achieving the outcome is not a hopeless prospect. Duties to devote ourselves, in contrast, appear to have exactly the right kind of uncompromising or unyielding quality. That is because of the distinctive functional profile of devotion. Not only is it intelligible to devote ourselves to an infeasible outcome, but devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome (whether feasible or infeasible) itself involves a disposition to continue to do things because of the value that would be realised by achieving the outcome even insofar as achieving the outcome is a hopeless prospect (so

²⁰ Indeed, both of our objections to interpreting hopelessly utopian duties as duties to approximate the manifestly unattainable were of just this kind.

long as doing the things in question is a way of honouring the value of achieving the outcome). As such, it involves a kind of *resolute commitment* to the value attributed to the achievement of the outcome in question.

Another important feature of hopelessly utopian duties is their *teleological* quality: the fact that they require us to do things *for the sake of* achieving manifestly unattainable outcomes. Again, duties to devote ourselves seem to be duties of the right kind. As we have seen, devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome involves doing things for the sake of achieving the outcome in the sense that we are doing certain things (namely, things that would effectively help to achieve the outcome under favourable circumstances) *because of* the ostensible value of achieving the outcome. We do not count as devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome if we do things that we recognise to be ways of realising the ostensible value of achieving the outcome but we do not do them *because of* the ostensible value of achieving the outcome. For example, suppose that we value losing 10 kilograms and are going to the gym every day, not because of the ostensible value of losing weight, but simply because we value watching the cricket and the gym in question has television screens with the relevant cable network. This is not a case where we would count as devoting ourselves to losing 10 kilograms. At the same time, devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome involves a *special* way of acting for the sake of achieving the outcome: namely, because of the *ostensible value* of achieving the outcome. Doing things because of the ostensible value of achieving an outcome is obviously not the same thing as doing things *so as* to achieve (or make it more likely that we achieve) the outcome. Rather, it is a matter of doing things that we take to be ways of responding to the ostensible value of achieving the outcome.

Yet another important feature of hopelessly utopian duties is their potential *stringency* or *demandingness*: the fact that they may require us to take on potentially substantial costs. The idea that we could be required to take on such costs for the sake of achieving an outcome that we have no chance of achieving might seem deeply mysterious if not outright perverse. But it is readily explicable if hopelessly utopian duties are interpreted as duties to honour certain values. Duties to honour often require us to take on substantial costs. If devoting ourselves to achieving an outcome is the only way of appropriately honouring the value that would be realised by its achievement, and devoting ourselves to achieving the outcome requires us to bear substantial costs, then it follows straightforwardly that hopelessly utopian duties may require us to bear substantial costs on the supposition that hopelessly utopian duties are honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable.

B. Duties with the right content?

So far so good – honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable are duties of the right kind. But we also need to show that they have the right content or extension. We have been focusing on just one example of a hopelessly utopian duty: the duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death. Even if we are right that there might be a duty to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable in this case, this is hardly enough to show that the devotion interpretation of hopelessly utopian duties is plausible more generally. What we need to show is that we might have honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable in all and only those cases where we might have hopelessly utopian duties.

One kind of worry is that there are going to be *too many* honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable and, hence, that the devotion interpretation implies an implausible inflation of hopelessly utopian duties. It might seem that achieving a manifestly unattainable outcome will sometimes involve values that call for being honoured despite of the fact that not giving up on achieving the outcome seems to be plainly inappropriate and not something we have a duty to do. Suppose, for example, that we have intentionally or negligently made it the case that it is now manifestly unattainable for us to keep a promise we have made to our best friend to attend his wedding in New Zealand, say, by intentionally or negligently missing the last flight that would get us there on time. Attending the wedding plausibly involves a value (the value of keeping a promise) that calls for being honoured. Yet it seems implausible that we have a duty to devote ourselves to attending our friend's wedding. The right response is more plausibly to give up on attending the wedding and find some way of making amends.

This worry can be quickly answered. We have suggested that devoting ourselves to achieving a manifestly unattainable outcome may *sometimes* be the uniquely appropriate way of honouring the value of achieving the outcome. We have not suggested that it is *always* the uniquely appropriate way to do so. Indeed, it is sometimes a wholly inappropriate way of doing so. Devoting ourselves to attending our friend's wedding is a case in point. Exactly why this should be so is going to depend on the values in question. But suppose for the purpose of illustration that the value of keeping a promise consists in the value of not betraying the promisee's trust. Devoting ourselves to attending the wedding when this is manifestly unattainable is hardly going to do anything to

help affirm the value of not betraying the trust that we have, in effect, already betrayed by ensuring that we do not attend the wedding.

The devotion interpretation might also seem to imply that we can have certain hopelessly utopian duties the discharging of which will require us to make the best the enemy of the good. Consider our duties with regard to some serious injustice such as racial discrimination. Suppose that eradicating racial discrimination altogether is manifestly unattainable but that significantly reducing the most heinous instances of such discrimination is perfectly attainable. Suppose, moreover, that the only way to effectively pursue the reduction of racial discrimination is to give up on eradicating it. Under these circumstances, not giving up on eradicating racial discrimination would be to make the best the enemy of the good. More plausibly, we ought to *reduce* racial discrimination while looking for ways to make it feasible to do more. Yet the devotion interpretation would seem to imply that we have a duty not to give up on eradicating racial discrimination. That is because holding firm and devoting ourselves to eradicating – as opposed to merely reducing – racial discrimination seems necessary to fully recognise and affirm the value of persons as moral equals.

Again, this objection rests on a mistake.²¹ Even if we accept that devoting ourselves to eradicating racial discrimination is required to honour the value of persons as moral equals and that doing so is sufficiently important that we have a duty to devote ourselves to eradicating racial discrimination,²² it does not

²¹ We are very grateful to a referee for helping us to clarify the response to this objection.

²² Moreover, it is at least not obvious that this is so. One way to bring this out is to appeal to the Scanlonian idea that honouring the value of persons as moral equals requires doing what is compatible with treating each person who stands to be affected by one's conduct only in ways to

follow that the duty will be *decisive* – that this is what we ought to do all-things-considered. Whether we have a duty is one question, whether it is decisive in a particular situation is another. Even important duties may be *outweighed* by sufficiently important countervailing considerations. It would seem hard to deny that a situation where devoting ourselves to eradicating racial discrimination would compromise our capacity to effectively reduce it is a case of just this kind: that the reasons we have to significantly reduce racial discrimination would outweigh the duty we have to devote ourselves to eradicating it.²³ We may still recognise that we *have* such a duty insofar as we recognise that, even though giving up on eradicating racial discrimination is what we ought to do all-things-considered, there is nonetheless an important “moral remainder” that persists – a moral remainder that may manifest itself, for example, in our propensity to experience certain reactive attitudes such as regret and our sense of the importance of explaining ourselves to those who will continue to suffer discrimination even when such discrimination is significantly reduced.

which they could not reasonably object (Scanlon 1998). Devoting ourselves to the eradication of racial discrimination when this will mean foregoing the opportunity to significantly reduce the most heinous forms of such discrimination is surely not compatible with treating members of a racial minority who stand to be significantly adversely affected by such discrimination in ways to which they could not reasonably object. To do so would be to fetishise an abstract ideal while neglecting to attend to the interests of the persons whose moral equality is supposed to be of value. Or so it might be argued.

²³ A referee has raised the interesting worry that this appears to have the unfortunate implication that potentially very demanding hopelessly utopian duties (or at least those that are decisive) will fall disproportionately on individuals who simply do not have many options available to them since an individual who has lots of different possible courses of action is more likely to have weighty reasons to promote certain values. Our response is that hopelessly utopian duties, like any other duties, are subject to a *threshold of non-demandingness* such that we may only have duties to do things insofar as discharging the duties would not be unduly burdensome. Devoting ourselves to the manifestly unattainable will tend to be much more burdensome for those individuals with the fewest options and resources. Hence, we have good reason to think that it is not the case that such individuals will tend to have potentially very demanding hopelessly utopian duties, still less that they will tend to have such duties and that they will be decisive.

A final objection is that the devotion interpretation might appear unable to rule out the possibility of plainly objectionable forms of utopianism. To be sure, the devotion interpretation has no difficulty ruling out forms of utopianism that are objectionable because they are based on objectionable values. We do not have duties to devote ourselves to achieving outcomes that are undesirable, still less positively pernicious, whether or not we take them to be important. More challenging, however, are forms of utopianism that envisage social arrangements that might be genuinely valuable if they were achieved in some distant possible world but that appear to be fanciful or silly considered as a potential way of organising social life in this world. Consider, for example, the sorts of social arrangements envisaged by anarcho-socialists in which humans live in happy harmony without any need for a coercive state (Estlund 2020, ch. 1). Such arrangements are clearly fantastical and other-worldly, divorced as they are from even the most optimistic assumptions about ordinary human psychology and social life. Yet it might seem hard to see how the devotion interpretation is supposed to rule out the possibility that we could have duties not to give up on realising such arrangements. Assuming that they involve genuine values that call for being honoured, the fact that they are fantastical and other-worldly is neither here nor there.

We accept that this charge contains an important kernel of truth, namely, that we cannot rule out the possibility of such objectionably utopian duties on purely conceptual or *a priori* grounds. This is an inevitable consequence of enlarging the domain of potential duties to make room for the possibility of legitimate utopian duties, such as the duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death. We deny, however, that this is problematic. On the

contrary, it strikes us as a virtue of the devotion interpretation that it requires us to settle the question of whether we ought or have reason not to give up on achieving fantastical social arrangements on *normative* grounds. Anarcho-socialists were not making a logical or conceptual mistake; rather, they were in the grip of a highly questionable normative view. They both overestimated the value of the social arrangements in question and underestimated the disvalue of doing things in our actual circumstances that would help to bring about the arrangements in more favourable circumstances.

We have been focusing on the question of whether the devotion interpretation implies that there are too many hopelessly utopian duties. A quite different worry is that the devotion interpretation implies that there are *too few* hopelessly utopian duties – that there are important examples of hopelessly utopian duties that cannot be captured by interpreting them as duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable. Consider the duty not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty. Suppose for the sake of illustration that eradicating extreme poverty is manifestly unattainable; we know that there is no chance of us (individually or collectively) overcoming the structural impediments to eliminating (or even significantly reducing) poverty. It might seem that eradicating extreme poverty is important because of some value (say, the value of persons living minimally decent lives) that calls for being promoted rather than being honoured. If we're right that we cannot have promoting duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable, it follows that we cannot have a duty to devote ourselves to eradicating poverty. Thus, we cannot have a duty not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty if hopelessly utopian duties are supposed to be duties to devote ourselves. But to deny the possibility of a duty

not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty might seem at least as implausible as denying the possibility of a duty not to give up on saving the woman from being stoned to death. It is a duty that at least some real-world anti-poverty activists take themselves to have.

One thing to be said here is that, even if a duty not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty must, in fact, be a duty to promote rather than a duty to honour, taking ourselves to have such a duty is perfectly consistent with interpreting it as a duty to devote ourselves so long as we are mistakenly *treating* it as a duty to honour. Moreover, it is at least not obvious that treating a duty not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty as a duty to honour really would be a mistake. Even if eradicating extreme poverty is important primarily because of some value that calls for being promoted (such as the value of individuals enjoying minimally decent lives), it might also seem to be important because of certain values that call for being honoured – say, the value of social justice, or the value of relational equality. And it is at least not outlandish to suppose that devoting ourselves to eradicating poverty is the only way to fully recognise and respect the value of social justice or the value of standing in a relationship of equality with others. What would be outlandish is to suppose that this *exhausts* the reasons we have to respond to the value of eradicating extreme poverty. As we have said, eradicating extreme poverty is also important (perhaps even primarily) because of the value of individuals enjoying minimally decent lives, and we surely have reasons to promote that value. (Such reasons do not support a duty not to give up on eradicating extreme poverty, but they do support a duty to do what we can to reduce poverty.) Our suggestion is simply that we may also have reasons to honour the value of eradicating extreme poverty, and that such reasons may

support a duty to devote ourselves to eradicating extreme poverty if devoting ourselves to eradicating extreme poverty is the uniquely appropriate way of honouring the values in question.

6. Conclusion

We began with a puzzle: there seem to be cases in which we can have hopelessly utopian duties, and insisting otherwise seems to allow us to settle for less than we ought; yet it also seems to be the case that “ought” implies “can,” and insisting otherwise seems to open the door to morality’s making demands that are illegitimately severe. A tempting solution to this puzzle is to interpret hopelessly utopian duties as duties to pursue (as opposed to achieve) the manifestly unattainable, thereby vindicating the possibility of hopelessly utopian duties without giving up on “ought” implies “can.” We have argued that, unlike its rivals, the devotion interpretation of hopelessly utopian duties, if correct, offers a way of delivering on this promise since it seems possible that we may have duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable that are grounded in reasons to honour values that would be realized by achieving manifestly unattainable outcomes, and that we may have such duties without corresponding duties to achieve the manifestly unattainable. Moreover, we have argued that we have good independent reason to think that the devotion interpretation is correct since honouring duties to devote ourselves to the manifestly unattainable seem to be of the right kind and to have the right content to provide a compelling interpretation of hopelessly utopian duties. The result is a nuanced account of the morality of radically utopian activity that is well-placed to navigate the twin

dangers of a morality that is objectionably permissive and one that is illegitimately severe.

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